

THE LOST PROVINCES.

How Vansittart Came Back to France.

By Louis Tracy.

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CHAPTER IV.
Le Breton's Ride.

When the history of the war of the revenge comes to be written the foremost place in that remarkable work will be assigned to the ride of the 5,000. To be a descendant of one of the 5,000 was a distinction for a youth and a dowry for a maiden. No similar achievement adorned the annals of their great country.

For a proper understanding of the scope and object of this unprecedented military operation it is necessary to quote fully the memorandum drawn up with such care by Vansittart during the meeting of the cabinet.

It was collectively addressed to Generals Villeneuve, Daubuisson and Le Breton (the last named having assumed the rank of general) and ran as follows:

"It is my intention that a column shall be formed at Sedan forthwith and dispatched, when fully equipped, for the purpose of cutting into and destroying the German lines of communication.

"The column will consist of 5,000 selected cavalry, soldiers, artificers and engineers and for the purpose of the expedition they will be supplied with two horses per officer and man engaged. The arms carried will be sabres, revolvers, carbines and a small number of machine guns. The order of priority shows the manner of their use, which must be solely defensive.

"No wheeled vehicles, ambulances, tents or baggage can be taken. The column must, when occasion demands, be able to move at the rate of ten kilometers (seven miles) per hour. Each member of the expedition will carry food and grain for himself and his horses, but squadding arrangements will be made for the conveyance of reserve ammunition, implements, dynamite and blasting powder.

"Anything approaching an engagement with the enemy must be absolutely avoided. Fighting will be the last alternative, but if the only way lies through the hostile lines, then that is the way.

"Those who fall die on behalf of France; those who live and perform their duties will have rendered their country the maximum of good service.

"The object of the column is destruction. Nothing of value to the enemy must be spared. Railroads, telegraph lines, bridges,

rail from Sedan, thus saving horses and men in a tiresome and useless march of thirty miles. It was risky, this railway trip. Longuyon, eleven miles further on, was in the hands of the Germans and a strong column was assuredly detached from the northern army to attack Montmedy, thus providing security on the right flank of the invaders. Vansittart had foreseen such a move—hence his order to mobilize at Sedan.

But Le Breton judged rightly that time was more important than risk and he was above all things anxious to get to work before any inkling of his approach could be obtained by the Germans.

He instructed his brigadiers to give to every man the opportunity of quitting the expedition where it was too late and to lay particular stress upon the sad necessity there was to abandon all who were so severely wounded as to be unable to ride.

Out of 5,000 troopers only one man, a private of the Eighteenth chassains in the Third brigade, stood out from the ranks when his brigadier invited those who had sought to say to declare themselves.

He was a native of Tarascon, a burly and muscular man, who had hitherto been regarded by his comrades as somewhat of a fire-eater.

"Nothing being detected was greeted with a roar of indignation by the Eighteenth.

"Holla, Tartarin!" yelled one. "Thou seest a lion, then?"

"This is no picnic for a capoteer!" cried another, and the laugh at these allusions to his immortal birthplace converted the common words into a shout.

Pierre Laronde turned fiercely on the scoffers.

"I fought with the emperor in the desert and rode with him to meet the president," he vehemently cried. "Those who are following die neither, I should think."

The credentials were excellent; they produced silence.

"Well, what of it?" said the officer good humoredly. He saw that it was no recant but that he was the object of a word with the general.

"I ask the honor of a word with the general."

"Hum, 'tis contrary to discipline, but this is not for my money. Come with me."

When the pair stood before Le Breton Laronde was in no wise abashed.

"General," he said, "I see a way of doing you some service."

"Out with it, and quickly."

"When I listened to the orders I said to myself, 'I will not do a day's duty, but perhaps the general, in attending to many things, may have forgotten one. The Germans are well served by field telegraph, and they must be prevented at the outset from making dispositions to stop our advance by too great force.' Such was my reflection, general."

"The reflection is good, soldier. Hast a plan?"

"But yes, I and nine chosen comrades, two of whom can speak German and work a telegraph instrument, will, if you approve, general, try to get through the enemy's pickets at dusk, and the line to Damvillers, the headquarters of General Kreuznach, cut it, connect up again, and tell him that a reconnaissance in force is in progress along the right bank of the Meuse from Montmedy."

"Ha! Kreuznach will think we travel south rather than west?"

"So, general."

"Thy name, soldier?"

"Pierre Laronde."

"Do this, Laronde, and when you next meet me you will see your epaulettes. I like officers who can think."

The man flushed with pleasure. He needed no higher incentive.

At 9 o'clock that night a message from the German commander at Longuyon informing the headquarters staff that all was quiet on the flank was suddenly interrupted. The operator in Longuyon, finding his instrument useless, reported the fact to his chief, who had also just received the unpleasant intelligence that two sentries had apparently been surprised and killed.

A cavalry patrol came galloping up. "Colonel," a strong body of the enemy's horse is advancing down the hill toward the bridge."

To give cover to this statement a sputtering of rifle fire broke out and momentarily drew in volume.

In fifteen minutes Longuyon was cleared of uhlans and Bavarians, three bridges were destroyed, two railroad viaducts blown up and a working party was busy planting a batch of dynamite cartridges with detonating fuses in a long tunnel that pierced the hills leading to the front line.

To the Germans confusion and chaos seemed to reign unchecked.

Those who kept their senses and were in touch with the fighting could not fail to notice that a vast body of horse, heedless of the conflict, poured hence through the village at the direction of Diedenhofen.

Meanwhile the defenders of the post were actively hunted in every direction.

A troop train, with several officers and half a battalion of Hanoverians on board, dashed off toward Spincourt, the nearest point by rail to Damvillers, and the main body of German communication, but it plunged into a ravine at a point where Pierre Laronde and his little band had thoughtfully removed a rail.

By midnight an entire division had been put in motion by General Kreuznach and was hastening northward with the utmost speed, as not a word of reply could the staff get to the singular and startling message from Longuyon, which came to hand at 9:10 p. m.

They encountered stragglers from the threatened flank, who announced that a French column—a division, an army corps of 100,000 men—had occupied Longuyon and was in full pursuit. Thereupon the commander of the relief thought it his duty to halt until daylight. He did so, marched cautiously to Longuyon and found only the evidences of the preceding night's disaster.

At 9 o'clock a dull explosion, followed by a violent earth tremor, meant that two months' hard work would scarce suffice to make the railway tunnel serviceable again, and Pierre Laronde and his comrades thought it high time to catch some riders less horses and ride fast after the main body.

Le Breton's method of advance was admirable. Whenever a bridge had to be destroyed or a section of the parallel railway dismantled, Le Breton and his men were there in their preparations, while the remainder of the force pressed on through the darkness.

When all had passed the dynamite did its work and the wreckers rode off to become the rear guard in their turn.

Sixteen miles from Longuyon the head of the expedition reached Audun-le-Roman, the erstwhile French frontier custom house. Here a small infantry guard was cut up and two customs officers, captured in the

first surprise of the invasion, set at liberty and told to escape as best they might.

Half an hour more and the sound of firing in front, instantaneously drowned in a wild outburst of cheering, proclaimed the fact to villagers started from their sleep that for the first time in a generation an armed force of Frenchmen had set foot upon the soil of Lorraine.

This was Fontoy, or Pentsch, as the Germans have it, and here Le Breton received a severe check, unpremeditated by either side.

The leading troopers entered round a bend into the village street and found themselves in a swarm of soldiers, infantry and artillery, being the nucleus of a division now hastily forming in order to re-form the main body on the Meuse. The hasty resolve of the Kaiser Wilhelm to penetrate into France at all cost was in process of realization at that moment.

After the first gasp of amazement the staid Prussians recovered themselves and a fierce affray at once began, growing instantly in volume as combatants from both sides packed into the narrow street.

Here, of course, the well drilled infantry had the advantage. In another minute volley firing would have determined the issue, when Le Breton, who rode ever close to the advance guard, arrived.

A single glance revealed the situation to him. He saw that his leading squadron must be sacrificed if he would save the rest. Spurring his horse into a furious gallop he rode back and halted the First brigade.

Reaching a cross road he halted the Second and placed four machine guns here, simultaneously retiring the First brigade southward to the right.

meet you. If you cannot—well—au revoir!"

Colonel Montsalvo saluted, mounted and centered off to place his column in motion.

A few minutes later the diminished main body followed, but deviated to the left and quickly gained the high road to Metz. Here they fell in with some scouting uhlans, riding furiously toward Diedenhofen to discover the cause of the complete breakdown in the telegraph to that important center.

None of these gentry escaped, else within an hour every cavalry soldier in Metz would have been in hot chase of the venturesome quarry.

Le Breton's advance now lay across country to Les Etangs, and thence to the rendezvous at Dieuze through Courcelles, Fouligny and Foulempont. The reader who follows the course of events on a good map of Lorraine will quickly see the general's object in splitting his force.

Should the junction by any chance be effected the two sections would have done enormous damage to no less than thirteen lines of strategic railways and twenty-four main roads. Nearly the whole of these were constructed for the sole purpose of conveying troops and war material to the frontier. It would be a phenomenal achievement to render this important section of the German communications wholly useless for a time and very inadequate for a much longer period, as even German military engineers require many days, perhaps weeks, to effectively bridge ruined viaducts, repair torn embankments and relay uprooted rails.

Metz, too, would be completely isolated, and this in itself was a magnificent result, the great fortress being a veritable storehouse of munitions of war.

Whilst the two columns went on with their

work of devastation the entire German host, spread over a superficial area of nearly 2,000 miles, was in an uproar.

The German staff was called upon to deal with, not war, but rampant lunacy. Somewhere in their midst a number of madmen, estimated variously from a regiment to an army corps, were raging about with antics similar to the struggles of a blue bottle in a spider's web.

The speed of their movements, the astounding effect of their passage, the conflicting reports as to their location at any particular time, were well calculated to upset the best laid plans in the school of the last war with France.

There had been fighting in many places, that was clear. But effectual pursuit was a different matter. Infantry was useless, and neither cavalry nor guns could hope to overtake men in the human shambles just beyond the village, while a series of explosions in the distance told the listeners that wherever the road crossed a stream numerous vedettes on the horizon warned him that his next forward step would be severely contested.

He was not mistaken. The salt mines at the latter town were crammed with German infantry. But they opened fire at a long range. This helped him a little, as he took round to the right—only to find the railway line to Nancy swarming with men.

At the range his machine guns were useless, and to give the necessary dramatic touch to the situation, three regiments of cavalry with six guns trotted into view right about the artillery promptly trying his metal with shrapnel.

With tired men and exhausted horses Le Breton knew that he was in a tight fix. In fact, he afterward admitted that he was quite certain his enterprise had there and then come to an untimely end.

But if he despaired he did not hesitate. Riding to the head of his column, he pointed with his sabre to the enemy's cavalry and shouted:

"There lies our road, my children," and his wearied troopers made a brave effort to follow him.

For the purpose of a charge they did not number 2,000, as the led horses, otherwise so useful, were now an embarrassment, and half of his men were guiding three animals apiece in the rear.

The frightful dust, too, rising from the galloping plain, added to the general confusion. In a word, everyone expected that the foray had collapsed.

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The unequal odds of the combat swung round with a vengeance. In place of German carving Frenchmen it was a case of precipitate flight to avoid being carved in their turn.

What puzzled Le Breton most, even in the midst of the melee, was the manner in which Montsalvo's brigade rode from out the defile. Their chargers lay to as though taking part in a field day at Versailles.

But Montsalvo soon explained: "I came upon six trainloads of remounts on the line between here and Vie," he shouted. "I boxed them in between two broken columns, helped myself, left a small guard and the remainder are waiting for you."

than half of their own wearied animals, which, by the ruthless law of war, they were compelled to shoot.

Another desperate effort enabled them, as evening fell, to gain the shelter of a defile in the Vosges mountains. So tired were they that they fell asleep as they lay, and at the earliest possible moment Le Breton halted to enable them to recuperate somewhat.

Toward midnight the unpleasant inquisitiveness of the enemy's cavalry scouts forced the French commander to once more arouse his worn-out followers. For two hours they jogged steadily onward through rocky valleys, shrouded in gloom by the frowning heights. Then Le Breton decided that, come what might, his men and horses should have a thorough rest in the woods, which were absolutely unfitted for the stern work of the following day.

The Germans, of course, were now on the alert throughout the whole of their southern lines of connection.

The suspense was bitter and scathing telegrams to the generals of division at Forbach and Sarrebourg for having allowed the quarry to slip through their hands, and the latter unfortunate officer was summarily degraded in rank.

The headquarters staff felt certain, from the latest despatches to hand, that the French marauders would endeavor to regain the shelter of their comrades' entrenched camp at Lunville; imperative orders were in consequence given for a powerful force to be in the neighborhood of Avricourt and Metz, in order to cut them up when they appeared.

And cut up they assuredly must have been had they tried to force this passage at any time after daybreak on Friday morning. Every hilltop was lined with scouts, every road and possible outlet crowned with furious German troops, longing for the opportunity of revenging the insults heaped upon their arms, and the frightful havoc done to their communications by this intrepid body of horse.

Hour after hour the Germans waited, eagerly scouring the eastern horizon for the first signs of their approaching enemies. At last they were roused into frenzied activity. The enemy had indeed arrived, but from a wholly unexpected quarter.

General Daubuisson, in person, leading a strong reconnaissance of cavalry and horse artillery from Lunville, was now forcing passage through the main lines of the German invaders. Of this more anon.

At 9 o'clock on a bright May morning Le Breton and his brigadiers rode along the ranks of their gallant followers, addressing words of encouragement and good cheer to the men.

The general had resolved upon the execution of one last bold coup before the final dash was made for liberty and France. There, five miles away, on the other side of the Schirneck pass, lay the little town of Metz, a great depot and manufacturing plant arms and munitions, but now, he learned from the peasants, densely occupied defenders save some hundreds of busily occupied workmen, most of whom were secretly enthusiastic Alsatiens.

Fifteen miles earlier east the Rhine flowed between vine-clad cliffs and in the intervening country were the main lines of railway between Strauburg and Colmar, two branch lines, the Rhine canal and two main roads, north and south.

To ruin Metz and its stores and destroy the thoroughfares by rail, road and water, indeed, provide a glorious finale to the most remarkable achievement ever carried through by so small a force in a country held by such armies as owned the sway of the Kaiser.

Le Breton made no secret of his desperate enterprise and his men acclaimed him as he told them what he wanted them to do.

After all they had already accomplished with his guidance they would have followed him in an attack upon Metz itself!

The column had crossed the top of the pass when the rear guard saw through their glasses a solitary horseman spurting furiously after them. He was hatless, dressed in civilian attire and obviously alone. They waited in silence until he drew near. When they halted he explained, with an unmistakable British accent, that he was one of the correspondents of the Times and asked to be brought before the general.

This newcomer was in strange plight. His clothes were torn and shot through in several places. Along his right cheek a bullet had torn a slight furrow which had nevertheless healed, and he rendered his sorry object. His horse, a fine hunter, was in the last stage of exhaustion and barely able to support himself by propping up his forelegs when the mysterious rider dismounted. The man, too, though strongly built and hard looking, was clearly suffering from hunger and fatigue.

Yet his manner was perfectly calm and the French soldiers marveled whence or how he had reached them, whilst his first thought was for his horse, in whose behalf he quickly provided a good meal.

The officer he addressed did not know how to deal with this apparition, so he promptly acceded to his request and took him to the general.

"Whom have we here?" was Le Breton's first question.

The Englishman produced his official pass, signed by Villeneuve and Daubuisson, setting forth that he was Mr. Herbert Fairfax, war correspondent of the Times and fully accredited to accompany the French army in the field.

"How is this?" cried the astounded general. "When did you come?"

"From Lunville. I left last night in advance of General Daubuisson's column."

"Column! What column, monsieur?"

"A cavalry reconnaissance in force, which by this time is breaking through the German front at St. Die."

"With what object?"

"In order to ascertain your whereabouts and assist you if possible."

"Diable, 'tis well. Yet how could Daubuisson have known of your presence so accurately?"

"The cavalry scouts had been provided or brought necessary by the Germans, so the affair was over with the speed of a summer gallop. The six guns and their attendants were literally ridden down."

A German infantry battalion, perceiving the disaster, changed front in order to return the compliment to the French cavalry, but Le Breton, heedless of the northern artillery, ran his machine guns out into the open and gave the deploying infantry other occupation than emptying saddles at 500 yards.

In five minutes Montsalvo and the survivors of the brigade—they had met with some trouble before they finally blew up a lock in the canal—entered Metz.

This temporary success alerted the troops, yet the most sanguine amongst them knew well that there was no chance of being extricated. All they could do was to sell their lives dearly.

The German fire became fiercer and more effective. The wretched inhabitants of the town, sheltered from the night, and the strenuous hands who sheltered among the houses and set them on fire, the flames driving forth those who had escaped from the projectiles to encounter greater risk from the bullets that flew in all directions.

Wounded horses screamed with pain and freight. The number of burning houses increased at such a rate that all Metz seemed to be enveloped in smoke and sparks. The still air became oppressively hot and people fainting from sheer exhaustion and despair. Through this pandemonium dashed and shrieking women and children raced about wildly, seeking for some neck secure from the laden showers, or collapsed, speechless and horror-stricken, where they chanced to fall.

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now reached the locality from Strauburg, and a determined attack was made upon the two available gates, whilst first artillery took the place of the destroyed battery.

Even Fairfax was beginning to think the Times would be full next morning of a sharp rattle of musketry and the deeper boom of cannon on the west caused the hearts of the defending force to beat with tremulous anticipation.

Was it only a development of the German assault, or could it be the first step toward the final conquest? The French guns were engaging the nearest German battery, dismounted French cavalry were driving back the wings of the German infantry so unexpectedly taken in flank, and French horsemen were massing in squadrons preparatory to a support charge upon the entire length of the German position on the north.

Le Breton's eyes were aflame as he roared the necessary orders to his officers. There was no time to wait for regularity or precision. Every man who could ride caught the end of another cigar with his teeth, and he rode on as if he were a man of iron.

Ten minutes later the French reconnaissance column was in full retreat toward the Vosges, not forgetting to blow up every bridge they crossed in the march. The last sight of blazing Metz enjoyed by Le Breton and his comrades was from a hillside where the road enters the Schirneck pass, whence they could clearly see that their erudite assailants had found fresh occupation as amateur firemen.

Utterly spent with the labor and excitement of the past sixty hours, too exhausted to eat, too weary to even speak, they jogged on through the night, and the strenuous hands of their comrades were needed to keep more than half of them from lying down by the roadside.

Whenever a halt was necessary it was with difficulty the men were started again. Curious enough, the great officers were those who retained their vitality to the last. Le Breton and his 5,000—now, alas, little more than three—had ridden nearly 130 miles in sixty hours through a hostile country swarming with foes. They had fought seven battles, they had worked like slaves in their tank of destruction, they had slept little and eaten less.

But the blow they struck at the German army was incalculably severe.

Above all else it gave Vansittart the one great success he had in his life in piling his brains and his money against the German emperor.

Time alone, to his view, was what he required, time to recuperate the exhausted energies of France, to continue her dormant strength.

(To be Continued.)



IN A FEW STRIDES THE LEADING SQUADRON WAS IN THE MIDST OF THE BATTLE.

The remainder followed, but the movement had barely started when the remnant of the advance guard fell back, closely pursued by some mounted German gunners with a mass of infantry pressing on behind.

But Le Breton's turn had come. The great advantage of the machine gun is that its fire is as destructive by night as by day, once the position of the enemy is clearly defined.

In this case all that was needed was to align the guns along a comparatively level road and the machine gunners, using an absolute torrent of lead into the mixed German force.

Nothing could live against it. The pursuers, unable to retreat with sufficient rapidity, owing to the crowding and confusion behind, suffered frightfully. Hundreds of men fell in that slaughter house, and those who sought to escape into the fields were ruthlessly cut down by French cavalry, posted there to prevent at all hazards a flank attack on the new line of advance.

It must be remembered that the German officers were wholly ignorant of the true position and consequently unable to make better disposition for assaulting this marvelous foe who had sprung from nowhere.

And he disappeared as promptly as he had arrived, leaving murderous tokens of his visit in the human shambles just beyond the village, while a series of explosions in the distance told the listeners that wherever the road crossed a stream numerous vedettes on the horizon warned him that his next forward step would be severely contested.

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WHEN ALL HAD PASSED, THE DYNAMITE DID ITS WORK.

rolling stock, commissariat trains, equipment and stores of every description, the only exception being hospital appliances, must be wrecked, burned or blown up.

The total distance to be covered, taking the line of the frontier from Villersart to Markirch, and allowing for detours, is, say, 125 miles. I will regard it as an excellent performance if the column emerges at St. Marie aux Mines (Markirch) within five days.

General Villeneuve will provide horses, saddles and equipment, a highly important item being a abundance of good maps of the frontier. General Daubuisson will supervise the selection of officers and men. General Le Breton will take command of the column.

I leave to Le Breton complete discretion as to the particular route to be followed, whether in French or German territory. The measure of his success will be the loss and delay inflicted upon the enemy's lines of communication.

I would recommend, however, that he give his forces a small number of riders, that at the first halt he should explain to every officer and man the exact nature of the enterprise and the conditions governing it—that he should start on Wednesday, and that the rapidity of his advance should be governed only by the minimum of time required to destroy permanent works. The resistance offered by the enemy, when unavoidable, should never check the forward movement of the expedition.

In conclusion, I wish General Le Breton and his officers and men good fortune. France commits her destinies to their hands, and I am assured they will prove worthy of the trust.

"My friends—to our next president!"

Such was the extraordinary "order of the day" that Le Breton caused to be read out by every company in his little army when, on the evening of Wednesday, it halted for an hour almost within sight of the charming village of Longuyon, situated at the confluence of the Crusne and the Chiers and noteworthy as the junction of two frontier lines of rail.

The expedition had gained Montmedy by

HEADACHE

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